

What is the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative and why do we need it?

More than one million infants worldwide die every year because they are not breastfed or are given other foods too early. Millions more live in poor health, contract preventable diseases, and battle malnutrition. Although the magnitude of this death and disease is far greater in the developing world, thousands of infants in the United States suffer the ill effects suboptimal feeding practices. A decreased risk of diarrhea, respiratory and ear infections, and allergic skin disorders are among the many benefits of breastfeeding to infants in the industrialized world.

In the United States, these benefits could translate into millions of dollars of savings to our health care system through decreased hospitalizations and pediatric clinic visits. For diarrhea alone, approximately 200,000 US children, most of whom are young infants, are hospitalized each year at a cost of more than half a billion dollars. Many of these cases of diarrhea could have been prevented with breastfeeding. In a study of the morbidity in an affluent US population, Dewey and colleagues found that the reduction in morbidity in breastfed babies was of sufficient magnitude to be of public significance. For example, the incidence of prolonged episodes of otitis media (ear infections) was 80% lower in breastfed as compared to non-breastfed infants. The cost savings to the health care system could be enormous if breastfeeding duration increased, given that ear infections alone cost billions of dollars a year.

It is a rare exception when a woman cannot breastfeed her baby for physical or medical reasons. Yet, a woman's ability to feel self confident and secure with her decision to breastfeed is challenged by her family and friends, the media, and health care providers. Much has been done in the past few years to strengthen the sources of support for women to breastfeed. Although the hospital is not and should not be the only place a mother receives support for breastfeeding, hospitals provide a unique and critical link between the breastfeeding support provided prior to and after delivery.

The Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative (BFHI) is a global program sponsored by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to encourage and recognize hospitals and birthing centers that offer an optimal level of care for infant feeding. The BFHI assists hospitals in giving mothers the information, confidence, and skills needed to successfully initiate and continue breastfeeding their babies or feeding formula safely, and gives special recognition to hospitals that have done so.

The Ten Steps To Successful Breastfeeding

The BFHI promotes, protects, and supports breastfeeding through The Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding for Hospitals, as outlined by UNICEF/WHO. The steps for the United States are:

1. Have a written breastfeeding policy that is routinely communicated to all health care staff.
2. Train all health care staff in skills necessary to implement this policy.
3. Inform all pregnant women about the benefits and management of breastfeeding.
4. Help mothers initiate breastfeeding within one hour of birth.
5. Show mothers how to breastfeed and how to maintain lactation, even if they are separated from their infants.
6. Give newborn infants no food or drink other than breastmilk, unless *medically* indicated.
7. Practice "rooming in"—allow mothers and infants to remain together 24 hours a day.
8. Encourage breastfeeding on demand.
9. Give no pacifiers or artificial nipples to breastfeeding infants.
10. Foster the establishment of breastfeeding support groups and refer mothers to them on discharge from the hospital or clinic

<http://www.babyfriendlyusa.org/>